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pa The theme of your conference--"Putting Children First: Whose Business and How?"--certainly is appropriate in this International Year of the Child. This theme is not new or novel for most of us. Many pioneers in the social welfare field were involved in the establishment of the U.S. Children's Bureau and in organizing White House conferences on children and youth to dramatize the plight of children. The agenda of issues and concerns that confront us today is not substantially different from those dealt with earlier by our mentors. The recurrence of the question today is symptomatic of the malaise that afflicts us--namely that the nagging problems persist and that we need to continue our search for solutions and answers.

Before this conference ends perhaps you will have found some answers. However profound and useful they may seem, answers by themselves are insufficient. Equally important as the search for knowledge is the ability to transport these insights from the professional domain into the political arena. For I believe that it is largely by way of the political process that knowledge is translated into social policies and programs, and resources are mobilized to support services benefiting children.

Remarks prepared for delivery by Dr. Joan S. Wallace, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Administration, before the Northeast Conference of the Child Welfare League of America, Amherst, Massachusetts, June 13, 1979

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Let us get back to the question--whose business? My response is to accept the most obvious answer that it is "everyone's" business to put children first. The future well-being of society rests on the quality of child care that is provided now. Children are an integral part of our human capital, a resource for whose guardianship and development all of society joins with parents. Such investment requires examination not only for children because they are children, but also because of their current contribution to family life and their potential social contribution in adulthood.

Although the answer appears to be axiomatic and self-evident to most of us, there does seem to be a great deal of discrepancy between our cherished beliefs and practices. Facts clearly reveal that children are perhaps the most neglected and forgotten group of our social institutions. Political and economic disturbances throughout the world have left children uprooted and victims of benign neglect. You do not need a deep knowledge of social welfare history to discover that there were laws on the books for prevention of cruelty to animals before there were statutes outlawing abuse of children.

As we approach the end of this decade, it appears appropriate during 1979, the International Year of the Child, that members of various constituent groups look back over the last 10 years to assess the contributions made by their particular groups to the general well-being of children.

In 1976 when the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed this year as the International Year of the Child, the United States responded by establishing a national commission to join more than 100 other nations in a worldwide effort.

The U.S. commission, while interested in the United Nations' focus upon the one and a half billion children who live on earth, placed primary focus upon needs of children in the United States.

To determine how well young people are being cared for in the United States, the commission decided to checkoff the status of America's children by using the basic rights of childhood spelled out 20 years ago by the United Nations.

The United Nations' Declaration of the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1959, declared that every child on this planet had the right:

- o To affection, love and understanding.
- o To adequate nutrition and medical care.
- o To free education.
- o To full opportunity for play and recreation.
- o To a name and nationality.
- o To special care, if handicapped.
- o To be among the first to receive relief in times of disaster.
- o To learn to be a useful member of society and to develop individual abilities.
- o To be brought up in a spirit of peace and universal brotherhood.
- o To enjoy these rights, regardless of race, color, sex, religion, national, or social origin.

In the light of that proclamation, the commission checklist surfaced some alarming disparities. There are approximately 66 million citizens in the United States under the age of 18--nearly one third of our population.

Of that total number:

- o Seventeen and a half million exist in dire poverty.
- o Approximately 20 million under the age of 17 have never seen a dentist.

- o Mental health services are not available to an estimated 90 percent of children who need them.
- o Twenty million are not fully protected against prevalent childhood diseases.
- o One million are the victims of child abuse and neglect.
- o Approximately 7.9 million are handicapped--1.2 million under the age of six.
- o Sixty-two percent of handicapped children from birth to five years of age are not receiving services they need; between ages 6-19, 42 percent are unserved.
- o Twenty-nine million are the children of working mothers--6.4 million of them under the age of six. Yet adequate day care facilities exist for only 1.25 million children.

As youngsters progress from infancy and childhood into early adolescence, their "growing pains" intensify. Many are confronted with pressures, influences, decisions and options they could not have anticipated and are not equipped to handle. Their problems are disturbing and real. For instance:

- o One million run away from home each year for reasons ranging from teenage rebellion to untenable living conditions from which they must escape.
- o More than 600,000 children are born each year to teenage mothers.
- o Almost three times as many youngsters committed suicide during 1977 as did in 1950. The suicide rate for teenage males between 15 and 19 years has tripled since 1950 and has more than doubled for boys between 10 and 14. Only accidents and homicides outrank suicide as the leading causes of death in this age group.

- o Problem drinking has increased 50 percent among young children since 1966. The largest increase occurred among seventh and eighth grade children--boys from 5 percent to 15 percent and girls from 9 percent to 16 percent.
- o Thirteen percent of 17 year olds in school today are functionally illiterate.
- o Sixty-eight percent of the robberies and 50 percent of the assaults on youngsters occur in school.
- o One-fourth of the children who complete fifth grade drop out of high school before graduation.
- o A half million children live away from their families in facilities that range from foster homes to large institutions.
- o Seventy-seven thousand children under 18 are in prisons; approximately 14,000 of them are incarcerated with adults.

To most of you these facts, as sobering as they are, may not shock you. For you live with the problems of the poor.

We might document and amplify this dismal saga still further. For those in the mental health field, perhaps the best place to begin is 1969, with the publication of "Crisis in Child Mental Health: Challenge for the 1970's," by the Joint Committee on Mental Health of Children. Hailed as a "veritable Magna Carta for the children of the United States." The report cited the following ominous statistics:

- o One million four hundred thousand children under the age of eighteen needed psychiatric care in 1966. Of these, nearly one million did not receive the care they needed.
- o Not a single community in the country provides an acceptable standard of services for its mentally ill children, with serious gaps existing uniformly with respect to early therapeutic intervention.
- o Recorded delinquency and youth crime rates have shown an alarming increase over the past decade.
- o Each year almost one million youths drop out of school with inadequate skills and with a diminished chance of becoming productive citizens.

Despite these warnings to the mental health profession ten years ago, there has been little concerted action and an acceleration in the rates of alcohol and drug abuse, criminal offenses, and suicides among children and teenagers.

Consider the statistics involving the black child:

- o There are 35 deaths for every 1,000 births of black children compared to 19 deaths in the first year for every 1,000 births of white children.
- o Nearly 40 percent of the black children in this nation are hungry, lack care and adequate shelter.
- o Fifty-two percent of all blacks living in poverty are under the age of 18.
- o Forty-three percent of all black children rely on the earnings of the mother compared to 14 percent of the whites.

Further documentation shows that despite the high standard of living which most U.S. children enjoy, many are victims of indifference, poverty, and discrimination.

So what should the federal government do in the business of "putting children first?"

Since President Lyndon B. Johnson began his "War on Poverty," there has been a conscious national effort to attack our social concerns with a massive effort.

The "War on Poverty" was unfortunately submerged by our involvement in Vietnam, a conflict that led to a national trend toward conservatism. Subsequently, inflation and the soaring costs that resulted led to a taxpayers' revolt symbolized by Proposition 13.

In the face of growing demands for curtailment of federal spending, your federal government is staffed by executives and employees--bureaucrats, if you will--dedicated to squeezing the last cent out of every dollar that Congress is provides for the welfare of our underprivileged children.

The emphasis among government executives is to get programs, whether in health, education, recreation, or food and nutrition, to low income people--the people for whom the programs are designed.

In the Department of Agriculture the food stamp program has been revised. Food stamps no longer have to be purchased. They are made available free to eligible low income persons.

With the elimination of the purchase requirement, families which previously did not have enough money to buy food stamps are now able to participate in the program.

This revision, plus greater outreach efforts to bring the program to the rural poor, has swelled the food stamp rolls from 15.9 million in December to 19.1 million at last report.

Additional persons who are using food stamps come from the ranks of the elderly and the handicapped. In past years their meager assistance checks would not permit them to buy food stamps. They existed on a woefully inadequate diet. Today food stamps supplement their funds that are far below the poverty level.

While Secretary Bob Bergland's efforts to obtain supplemental financing of the food stamp program finds stiff resistance from certain quarters, researchers for the Field Foundation recently issued a heartening report.

It said the federal food stamp, the school lunch and related food assistance programs "have ended the national shame of poverty conditions so gross that they horrified the public."

The research team referred to a report on poverty that was publicized in the late 1960's. The group's original report led to an array of federal assistance programs.

Nick Kotz, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his articles on hunger, told the Senate Subcommittee on Nutrition that "these (food programs) are the programs that have worked. There has been an enormous payoff. These are not the failed manpower or housing programs."

The report said some pockets of hunger remain, but the overall "food aid programs may represent one of the unsung, yet most effective antipoverty efforts of the last 15 years."

The Field Foundation team found many testimonials in support of the success of the food stamp program.

Unfortunately, this report did not make headlines. The subcommittee's chairman, Senator George McGovern concurred that "of all the Great Society programs, the nation's feeding programs have been the most successful."

When organizations such as the Field Foundation talk about the federal food programs in addition to the food stamps, they are including the Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC).

The WIC program provides high-quality protein, iron, calcium and vitamins A and C to pregnant women, nursing mothers and young children. Because WIC operates through health care centers, it integrates health care, nutrition, education and food assistance.

The federal child nutrition programs administered by USDA include the school lunch, school breakfast, special milk, child care, summer food service, and food service assistance programs.

When I joined the department some 18 months ago, I wasn't prepared to find so many so-called bureaucrats thoroughly dedicated and concerned about the effectiveness of their programs.

The majority of the 120,000 employees delivering 274 programs through 17 USDA agencies exemplifies that observation. Whether it involves the grading of meat, produce or poultry to assure food wholesomeness, the development of projects to save our needed soil and water resources, or providing financing for housing and other rural development needs, the professionals and technicians of USDA comprise a truly remarkable team.

In this cynical period, that finds the overburdened taxpayer, the harassed consumer, the perplexed politician, and the exhausted executive using hardworking bureaucrats as targets for their verbal darts to vent their frustrations, the work of the government goes on.

In the departments of Housing and Urban Development, Interior, Labor, Commerce, and Health, Education and Welfare, the future of America's children ranks high on the problem-solving agenda.

Through improved creative housing programs, enlarged recreational opportunities, expanded job programs, urban and rural development, and research to improve the quality of education and medical services, there is an awareness and a desire to eradicate the disparities suffered by this nation's children from enjoying all of the rights of the child declared by the United Nations.

Unfortunately, the good work of the dedicated workers in the social service area does not make headlines.

As the U.S. Commission on the International Year of the Child noted, our children are not inheriting a perfect world.

A truly educated person--whether that education is drawn from the school, the streets of life, or dealing with cases as a social worker--remains humble in his or her own ignorance.

A truly educated person forever recognizes how little he or she knows and how much remains to be learned.

But, the truly educated person also recognizes the skills and talents that she or he has to bring to bear to face these challenges of life.

In our time, meetings such as this are important to take a hard look at the nation's programs for children and mobilize every possible supportive action to promote the productive ones.

It is important that from the analysis of this regional conference:

- o That information based on available programs and services to children be established.
- o That guidelines for identifying services which are needed in each community for children be developed.
- o That a blueprint for action that can be taken throughout the country to ensure the needs of young children will be sketched.

The dimensions of this task are substantial. The successful outcome of this undertaking is dependent on not just the actions of the federal government, but also on the degree to which Americans--together and as individuals--are willing to re-evaluate the status of our children, and to act on new insights and knowledge for the benefit of children everywhere.

In the words of the Margaret Mead:

"In a darkened world beset by the fear of nuclear holocaust, degradation of our soil and air and imbalance of population growth that threatens to strangle our human settlements, the Year of the Child stands like a beacon of hope. We must see that its light guides us and gives us direction for preparing a livable, sustainable, beautiful world for our children--those who have been born, and those children of the future not yet conceived. By keeping our eyes steadily on the pressing needs of children, we can determine what needs to be done, and what can be prepared for but accomplished later. For babies cannot wait."

Unfortunately, as you will note as this conference continues, there are no easy answers to the problems that challenge and confront us.

We live in a world today facing powerful adversaries and with weapons so awesome that much of the world can be destroyed by the push of single button.

The cost of maintaining security is enormous. It burdens our economy and our adversaries' economies.

It drains away money that could be used for our own living standards and fighting hunger and poverty. The U.S. Commission on the International Year of the Child has been operating on the barest of budgets, for example.

We have a critical energy problem that finds our domestic sources of oil and natural gas dwindling. Our dependence on cartel controlled imports continues. This, too, imposes an extraordinary cost burden on our people and fans the flames of inflation.

Meanwhile, the debate over nuclear power as an alternative to other fuels, has grown much hotter since the Three-Mile Island incident and leaves the future of atomic power clouded.

But, in spite of the clouded conditions, I am optimistic. I am optimistic because organizations such as the Child Welfare League, and people like you, are joining a growing vanguard of caring people committed to the well-being of children of this nation and throughout the world.

The International Year of the Child may be a blessing in disguise.

In this fast-paced, technologically advanced and relatively affluent society, where spaceships and satellites have become as common as cross-country flights and telephone poles, the dialogue over the realities of the children's rights has led Americans to rediscover their "soul."

The children of today, who hold the key to the future of humanity, cannot plead their cause.

But, they have you as their advocates. You have responded to the cries of the naked by clothing them, and the anguish of the hungry by feeding them, and the needs of the homeless by providing shelter.

But, most of all, through your concern you have exemplified the highest expression of love.

Have a good conference--and if I may be presumptuous--for the children of the world may I say to each of you who have committed yourself toward making the United Nations' Declaration of Rights of the Child a reality--thanks.

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